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North-South International Cooperation: a New Beginning?

The discussion about the project of a new North-South Centre for Development Research, as part of the proposed International Science Forum of the City of Bonn, is an excellent occasion to examine the current stage of North-South cooperation, to which the proposed centre should eventually fit.

International Cooperation and colonialism

International cooperation in the fields of education, science and technology has gone through significant transformations in the last several years. Previous to the Second World War, and, going back at least to the nineteenth century, international cooperation in these fields were understood above all as a means to extend the cultural preeminence of the European powers upon their colonies and other non-European countries under their influence. These were the years of imperialism, which assumed different shapes and forms. Britain stimulated the creation of universities and research institutes in its colonies, and bought the brightest students and scientists from the colonies to study and work on its main institutions. France treated the colonies as part of its own territory, tried to extend to them its educational institutions, and opened its universities to intellectuals and the children of the colonial elites. France, Germany and Italy sent cultural and scientific missions to other countries, paving the way for their presence and influence. The University of São Paulo, Brazil's main academic institution, was organized in the early 1930's, and benefitted from the presence of French and Italian scholars, who came to Brazil with their countries' official blessings. From the United States, the Rockefeller Foundation worked to make the world healthier and safer to American presence and business. Whenever these initiatives prospered, they helped to create small, enlightened native elites which were culturally and emotionally linked to the metropolis, even when, after the War, they became the leaders of the revolutionary movements that brought the era of imperialism to an end. In most cases, as these elites came closer to the values and culture of the metropolis, they moved away from their own societies. Other imperial powers, such as Portugal, Belgium and the

Netherlands, were not interested or did not try to link the elites in their colonies to their own cultures, and this may explain the exceptionally difficult processes of decolonization still plaguing countries like Zaire, Angola and Mozambique.

International cooperation during the Cold War

After the second world war, North-South international cooperation took another turn, dominated by the cold war and the growing international presence of the United States. Sometime in the 1950's, the "backward" countries became known as "developing countries", and the question of whether they would develop with capitalist institutions, in alliance with the United States, or through a socialist revolution, in alliance with the Soviet Union, became paramount. Another consideration was the opening of international markets for all kinds of products that naturally followed the American presence. In many instances, strategic concerns led the United States to support backward dictatorships, and channel most of their foreign aid to military and anti-insurrectional activities. But genuine cultural, technical and scientific assistance and support also existed, led either by agencies such as AID or private foundations, such as Rockefeller and Ford. Research and educational centres concerned with developmental questions in Asia, Africa and Latin America sprouted throughout the United States in the 1960's. France, England, and later also Germany and Japan, maintained and often expanded their own activities of international cooperation, in an effort to keep their links with the former colonies and not to be submerged by the encompassing American presence. The Soviet Union tried to develop its own mechanisms for North-South cooperation, the best-known being the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow. However, most of its international actions were carried through the international communist movement and institutions and associations such as the International Student Union, the World Peace Movement and in the organization of International Youth Festivals. Except for countries under direct soviet influence, such as Cuba, ideological inducement of courtier elites, rather than international cooperation, was the norm.

Another feature of the post-war period was the growth of multilateral international cooperation, through the United Nations and related institutions such as UNESCO, International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Food and Agricultural Organization, and financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Inter American Development Bank. The Scandinavian countries, among other

small nations, discovered that they could develop an important international presence through these bodies, well beyond their demographic and economic size, and tried to put forward an internationalist perspective which went beyond what the larger powers were willing to accept.

This extraordinary web of contacts, interchanges and technical assistance programs left its imprint, although not necessarily in the ways intended by its promoters. The ways the developing countries used foreign assistance and cooperation depended more on their internal conditions than on the nature and amount of assistance and cooperation coming from abroad. The opportunities of international cooperation helped in the creation and strengthening of national scientific and intellectual communities and research competence in strategic fields like health and agriculture, in educational reform, and in the creation of a community of specialists in international cooperation in the North. In many countries, however, international cooperation did not differ much from pre-war colonial science, giving to a small elite an opportunity to migrate to the North, and alienating it still further from the local culture and population, even if they kept the rhetoric of nationalism and national independence. The most dramatic examples of this are the Black African and Muslim countries, where westernized elites had to give way to new leadership coming from their societies' grassroots, at the price of authoritarianism, political disruption and economic decay.

Transition: national interests and global issues

The end of the cold war marks the culmination of a transition in the area of international cooperation which was taking shape since at least the early eighties. It is not important, any more, to use technical assistance and international cooperation to keep developing countries away from the other block. But the transition started earlier, with the growing scepticism about the role technical assistance and international cooperation to foster economic development and democracy in many developing regions.

The internal difficulties in the United States and in many European countries made them much more inward looking, and resistant to international cooperation, than in the past. The ascension of neoliberal ideologies placed governments under suspicion, and led to growing disbelief about the effectiveness of international cooperation and the role of multilateral institutions such as the UN and its organizations. Questions of proliferation of atomic and other strategic weaponry, the difficult negotiations of international

debt, the programs of economic adjustment commanded and supervised by the International Monetary Fund, the pressures for enforcement of patent rights, free trade and the protection of foreign capital, and the efforts to limit the international production and smuggling of drugs to the developed countries, all these issues tended to face the relations between North and South in much more adversarial terms than in the past. The mobilization of third world countries to pressure for concessions and binding agreements in multilateral forums (from the United Nations General Assembly to the Rio de Janeiro summit on the environment) probably reinforced this trend. In many places, international cooperation was transferred to the private sector, and reduced to the search for new trade and investment facilities abroad, or to the creation of new opportunities in a booming market of international consulting.

As governments withdrew from international cooperation, private foundations and non-governmental organizations took much of their place. These new actors, and some of the old ones in new robes, have their agenda shaped by the social movements that are relevant to their own societies, and work to press their views and perspectives on other countries, in issues like human rights, poverty, population control, racial and gender equality, environment protection and grass-roots political participation. Most of these issues are universal today, and organizations such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace play important roles in making them more central to anyone's agenda. But the promoters of the new forms of cooperation do not know, and do not care much, about long-term issues like institution building, scientific and technological development, educational reform and many others of the previous years; which are still important if the countries in the South are to deal effectively with their internal problems. In their militant and often quasi-religious zeal, it is impossible not to note some resemblances between the promoters of this new forms of international cooperation and past efforts of ideological indoctrination.

The future: interdependence and partnership

North-South International cooperation has to be placed on a different footing, and there are indications that this is already beginning to happen. The basis for the new forms of cooperation is the growing interdependency and proximity between the countries in the world. The South always depended on the North for many things, from trade to technical assistance and access to knowledge and information. But, for the North, poor countries in the South were often treated as distant entities, sources of raw materials and cheap labour, markets

for export goods, infidels in need of conversion, nasty governments in need of containment, or poor people in need of help. Now, they may still be many of these things, but their population spills to the developed world, deforestation contributes to global warming, local crises can affect international trade, and situations of misery and violation of human rights are present in anyone's living rooms through global television.

The task for the promoters of these new forms of international cooperation is to find the areas and issues where true interdependency exist, and try to build institutions, programs and activities which addresses these issues, and attracts the interests of all parts involved. Institutions geared to international cooperation should get acceptance and respectability, and this requires that they steer away from the two extremes that still sets the done in this period of transition: the ill-disguised advocacy of local interests and the ideologically-minded, interventionist approach. It is not that self-interests are illegitimate, or that the ideological issues are irrelevant. What is wrong with these approaches is their ethnocentrism, which leads to the inability to perceive the others, and to establish fruitful, long-lasting and trusted relations of partnership.

Truly cooperative undertakings require stable, competent and reliable patterns on both sides. The task for countries in the South willing to participate in this new pattern of cooperation is to create and guarantee the quality and competence of the institutions and groups which should become the local basis of international exchange. Given the differences in wealth and competency, these North-South will never be fully symmetrical in terms of resources and knowledge transfer, but they should be as symmetrical as possible in terms of the genuine effort of each side to understand the needs, the conditions and the perspectives of the other.

The University of Bonn concept of International Cooperation

The concept of the proposed North-South Centre for Development Research to be established in Bonn should be discussed in terms of its potential for effective partnership in dealing with issues of shared interest between North and South countries.

A positive trait of the new Centre is its expressed self-interest. This will be an opportunity to enhance the scientific and educational density of the Bonn region, and increase its role as an international centre. It will try to bring together competencies and talents from all related institutions in the region, and provide them with new opportunities for study, consulting and research. As a

preliminary project, it is as inclusive and encompassing as possible, in terms of the local partners to which the project expects to link. At a later stage, however, it will be necessary to assure that these associations are not bureaucratic and indiscriminate, but linked to specific and well-evaluated research and educational projects.

The interests on the other side are taken for granted, which is to be expected from a project still in the planning stage. The issues of partnership and symmetry are dealt within the project through the internationally oriented graduate programme and the fellowship programs for foreign fellows. This is a good start; but it should be followed by the identification of reliable institutional partners in Southern countries for joint projects and for receiving students and fellows from Germany and other countries for varying periods of time. -This task is symmetrical to the identification of partners in Germany, which has already started. It might be a good idea to require financial contributions from these partners for projects of common interest. It could be excellent if the new centre could begin, from the onset, with well-defined partnerships with a few well-chosen institutions and groups in different parts of the world.

The agenda is sufficiently broad to cover several of the main issues of shared interest between North and South countries. There is still, however, some of the traditional tendency to deal with these issues as "their" problems (how their culture is, how they are dealing with the environment, how technological change is affecting them, what are their social and political conditions and constraints), rather than in terms of shared interests and conditions. A stronger emphasis on international questions could help to redress this situation - issues like international trade, international migration, and international relations in general are clearly missing, and would probably deserve a more visible place.

Also missing are the traditional academic disciplines that are at the basis of the applied fields that characterize the new centre's concept. Anthropology, for issues of culture; biology, earth sciences related fields for environment questions; economics; political science and sociology for issues related to technical, social, economic and political change; and several others. This is clearly intended to be so, since the expectations that the new centre will not be organized along academic lines, but in terms of practical issues to be tackled in pragmatic and concrete terms. However, solid disciplinary education is necessary for applied and multidisciplinary work, and this is something that developing countries often lack. The project of the new centre stresses its potential links with development research oriented groups in academic institutions in the Bonn area, but it may be a good idea to establish clear links

also with the best disciplinary departments and universities in the region, something which may be of special interest for students coming for graduate education and work.

In short, the proposed North-South Center is a promising project, and can become an important institution in its field, if can consolidate a relevant and competent research and educational agenda in fields of mutual interest between Northern and Southern countries, and find adequate partners to carry on the work.